

## PRIVATE VIEW: ROMAN ONDÁK



*Last year Tate bought Roman Ondák's Good Feelings in Good Times, which consists of a queue that can be staged at any time, and has already been "loaned" to an exhibition in Turkey*

# Why Are We Waiting?

By Max Andrews

← Roman Ondák  
*Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003–2004)  
People  
Installation views at  
Frieze Art Fair, 2004

→ Roman Ondák  
*Good Feelings in Good Times* (2004)  
People  
Installation views at  
Platform, Istanbul

In 1909, when Agner Krarup Erlang, an engineer working for the Copenhagen Telephone Exchange, penned what is now regarded by academics in the field as the founding paper of "queueing theory", it is fair to say he could never have foreseen its legacy in modelling today's sophisticated telecommunications networks. It would be even more dubious that he'd have anticipated his name being included in the first sentence of an article on a work of art. Yet Roman Ondák's *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003), the first artwork that Tate owns with its materials noted bluntly as "people", is all about anticipation – and queueing. Shown first outside the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 2003 and adapted for last year's Frieze Art Fair in London, it consists of an orderly line of about six people – professional actors who nonchalantly feign spontaneously assembling and dispersing queues according to the artist's instructions. (Or, in my case, Tate employees joining three professional queueers for a display for those who had supported the institution's acquisitions at the fair.)

To passers-by or visitors, the queue is apparently anticipating something. Surely these people must be waiting in line for a thing worth waiting for? Are they expecting the opening of an anonymous door where the head of the line might have assembled? Should we join the queue? Are we – perish the thought – missing out on some fabulous opportunity, or a promotional giveaway? Should we ask?

Having spent every day of the fair performing the work around the stands and facilities of its Regent's Park marquee, the actors had already developed an hilariously nuanced vocabulary of queueing behaviour when it came to my induction in the art of hanging around. Watches were nervously checked with method authenticity – the frustrating sense of time wasting was, after all, a palpable enough experience. Heads were shaken and strained in dismay at the imagined tardiness of the affair. Noncommittal, slightly glassy-eyed enquiry deflections were sighed – "I think we're in the wrong place", "it should



have started an hour ago" – and indignant rebuttals to perceived transgressions of protocol – "there is a queue, you know" – were mischievously deployed. At the fair performance the professional queuers apparently took to lining up repeatedly through the spaces of clearly peeved gallerists, and gleefully baffling the security guards.

The British capital has seen its share of mercenary queuer-uppers before. In autumn 2001, newspapers reported the founding of q4u London, an agency promising that in exchange for your cash, "responsible mature ladies will queue in your place to buy tickets and sales bargains". Time costs money, and when, according to a report on the queue jamboree that was the Millennium Dome, Brits spend the equivalent of 23 days a year in line, the queue's relationship with economics can be astonishingly ruthless. Charging through the nose for the privilege of skipping the wait, or the maths of how long potential customers can be relied on to hang around before parting with their cash – or demanding their money back – are all part of the jiggery-pokery of a queue-based market economy.

When applied to teletraffic – in other words the scourge of seemingly interminable automated telephone holding systems – we can blame queueing theory for a world that requires the existence of grating, brand-value infused jingles. Ditto for labyrinthine barriers. Yet there are countless other life-and-death applications – from a health service monitoring a list of organ transplants, to controllers determining the flight paths of aircraft waiting to touch down – where the discipline of queueing demands heavy theorising and heady formulae. In any system where new arrivals are placing an increasing demand on a finite capacity resource, be it kidneys or runways, there are numbers to be crunched.

But of course Ondák's bogus queue never moves.

Whether as a participant or an onlooker, no shenanigans or psy-chological resoluteness can avoid the work's stark, though comically futile promise that there will be no hand-out today, nor any other day.

Ondák lives in Bratislava, Slovakia, and he has described his gratuitous queue as a memory of the lines "that in the 1970s and 1980s often used to form in front of shops... In what everybody then called the bad times, people were capable of patiently waiting in queues and feeling good about it, because they thought at the end of it they'd probably get what they were hoping for". In both the context of the rationing and bread lines of embattled eastern Europe before the fall of Communism in 1989, or its pan-European legacy of migration, asylum quotas and visa-mongering in an expanding Union, Ondák's queue is a potent symbol of submission to inequality and bureaucratic justice where too many people need something and there is not enough to go around.

But at the poetic heart of the work, and in the buzz of its title's "good feelings", is surely the fact that there is a jovial testimony to human dignity and etiquette in the fact that people bother to queue at all. Despite the brutal crush of many a London bus stop scrum, or the whole evolutionary psychology conference that could be devoted to the wildebeest reflex induced by budget airlines, it's in the certifiably potty breed of the flask-wielding pavement camper that Ondák's piece comes home to roost for the British public. As demonstrated by those who wait outside the gates of Wimbledon for centre court tickets, or the folk first in line on the streets of Knightsbridge for the Harrods sale, a culture where the lure of a bargain and a shared goal can turn waiting itself into a fond ritual of camaraderie should surely innately sympathise with his good feelings? What are we waiting for?

*Roman Ondák's Good Feelings in Good Times (2003) was purchased from the artist with funds provided by the Frieze Art Fair Fund 2004. Ondák will be showing new work in Tate Modern's Untitled space in January 2006.*

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